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## RECENT PROGRESS OF THE FREE CHURCHES IN ENGLAND

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### I

Despite Shakespeare's lines,

What's in a name? that which we call a rose  
By any other name would smell as sweet

(an opinion which, dramatically appropriate on the lips of the speaker, we need not suppose to spring from the wisdom of Shakespeare), names carry not only a significant content but many precious memories and valuable associations. It meant much both for themselves and the world when "the disciples were called Christians first in Antioch." It is a sign of the recent progress of nonconformity or dissent in England that these names are not often heard, but that the term "Free Churches" has gained current use.

1. This change of name signifies first of all that a more distinct church consciousness has emerged. There are still many who are proud of calling themselves nonconformists or dissenters, and who in their antagonism to *the Church* are rather suspicious of these new developments as an ecclesiasticism which they distrust. But among the younger men especially, although men of a former generation, like Dr. Dale, had shown the way, there is a growing number who refuse to sacrifice to the idol of hostility to *the Church*, which has arrogated to itself that name, the New Testament conception and estimate of the Christian community as the body of Christ, the temple of the Holy Ghost, a building "fitly framed together by that which every joint supplieth, and so making increase of the body unto the building up of itself in love." The convictions of the early Independents regarding the presence of the Lord in the midst of believers gathered in his name is being

anew appreciated as for some time it was not. One of the barriers to the reunion of Christendom is slowly being laid low.

2. This change of name signifies secondly that a positive purpose is displacing a negative. The older terms nonconformity or dissent assume the controversies of the past and define the position in relation to the Church of England. While, as we shall see, there is a growing appreciation of that church as a Christian community, its peculiarity, as by state established, is being allowed to fall into the background as a reason for discord. The contrast is implied in the more positive purpose indicated in the term now preferred; the aim of these churches is to realize in their church thought, life, and work the freedom wherewith the Son maketh free. It cannot be pretended that in all these churches what such freedom implies is fully recognized. In all it means self-government and independence of the control of the state; in some it means, however, less freedom for the individual minister or member than in others. The legal position of the Christian churches cannot be said to be entirely unambiguous and satisfactory. The decision with regard to the property of the United Free Church of Scotland given by the House of Lords was generally felt to be nothing short of an outrage, an invasion by the state of the realm that properly belongs to the self-government of the church. What is necessary is that on ministers and members of churches alike there shall be imposed the obligation to accept as final the decision of the properly constituted authority in the church, without any appeal to the state. Even if an appeal to the state be made in disregard of such obligation the function of the law courts should be strictly limited to determine whether the decision has been reached in accordance with the constitution which the church concerned has adopted for itself. Until even as regards the terms on which property is held the churches have secured self-government without any interference from the courts of law, their ideal of freedom will not be fully realized.

## II

The Church of England has been chafing under its bonds. In order that it may adapt itself in its manifold ministry to the varied and varying needs of the country, for the religious condition of

which it claims the primary responsibility, it must change its now, in many points, antiquated organization. It has no power to legislate for itself, and parliament has neither the time nor the inclination to pass the necessary legislation for it. Ecclesiastical questions arouse so much partisanship in those who are interested in them, and are regarded with so much indifference, if not aversion, by the other members of the legislature, that governments readily yield to the temptation, for which they can easily find a plausible excuse in the already too great pressure on the legislature, to leave them alone altogether despite the injury thus inflicted on the church. The report of the Archbishops' Committee on the Relation of Church and State makes a number of recommendations in order to secure for the church the right to legislate for itself, subject to a veto on its legislations by parliament. Into the details of these proposals it would be beyond the present purpose to go; but the subject is relevant here, as not only does the confession by the church of the impotence which the state connection imposes upon it confirm the convictions of the Free Churches regarding the evil of subordinating church to state, but these churches are called on to decide what attitude they should assume to this endeavor of a sister-church to gain some measure of freedom. It is far too complex a question on which to give a summary decision; but a few considerations bearing on it may be offered for the judgment of the reader.

1. The Free Churches cannot be other than appreciative of the recognition by the church of the need of freedom from the control of the state in order that Christ may be more fully obeyed, and sympathetic toward aspirations and efforts to secure that freedom. They cannot avoid, however, a feeling of surprise at the surviving Erastianism of their Christian brethren, at the small measure of freedom claimed for the church, and the large measure of control still accorded to the state; and they can but wish that the venture for self-government had been less cautious and more courageous. The greatly improved relations among the Christian churches make criticism or opposition a very ungrateful task. Nevertheless the Free Churches, the present members of which have been free born, but cannot forget the price at which their fathers bought this freedom, must ask the church to consider whether the price of

complete freedom is not worth paying and must not be paid. There are nonconformists who still glory in that name who put the position very bluntly: without disestablishment no loosening of the bonds of the state connection.

2. In so far as jealousy of, or hostility to, the Church of England as established is the reason of this attitude, the majority of Free Churchmen, I am confident, do not share it, and do not want to keep the Church of England in bondage. There is, however, a principle involved, not ecclesiastical, but political, that with all generosity of sentiment to the church they cannot abandon, viz., the state must control what the state supports. The immense privileges that are the gift of the nation to the church as established cannot be handed over to what is after all only a section of the nation, however considerable and important it may be; for while the proposed constitution reserves in theory a far greater measure of control to the state than a Free Churchman can regard as even tolerable, yet in practice, owing to the aversion of both governments and parliaments to meddle with ecclesiastical matters, that control would probably not be exercised to any adequate extent to secure that the will of the nation should determine the use to be made of the privileges conferred by the nation. Personally I should be very sorry if this subject involved any renewal of the controversy and the conflict between the Free Churches and the Established Church. Surely there should be conference as Christian brethren before any political action that may inevitably provoke antagonism is taken by either side. My own conviction is that not only would the Established Church incalculably improve its relation with the Free Churches by voluntarily abandoning the state connection as the ransom for its freedom in Christ, but that it would be in a far better position, as both self-supporting and self-governing, to render to the nation the ministry that it is fitted to give. In a democracy becoming always more conscious of its meaning and aim, a privileged institution must be, and will be, at a disadvantage.

### III

Not only this reason, but others also are a challenge to the Free Churches to reconsider the negative attitude to the state, which the action of the state in compelling them to become nonconformist has

in the past imposed upon them. So long as the state was claiming the right to control the belief and worship of its citizens, the inevitable and proper cry was, "Hands off." Caesar is a usurper where Christ alone has the right to reign. But having won for themselves freedom, and now finding themselves in a state that does not desire to meddle in the things of the soul, the churches must ask themselves whether suspicion and antagonism may not yield to mutual confidence and co-operation. On the one hand many functions once discharged by the church have passed over to the state, such as education and the care of the poor. On the other the state is being moralized and Christianized in the sense that it is recognizing a wider and fuller responsibility for the whole welfare of all its citizens. The private philanthropy which the church directed is being replaced by the corporate action, legislative and administrative, of the society controlled by the state. For its own vitality and vigor the church must not abandon its interest in all these forms of public service; for the sake of the state the church must lend its instruction and influence to support state efforts.

1. Not all the Free Churches went equally far in their refusal to co-operate with the state. The Wesleyan Methodist and the Presbyterian churches felt no scruples about accepting payment out of taxes or rates of the salaries of Army and Navy chaplains and for services rendered in public institutions, such as workhouses, asylums, prisons; but many belonging to the Baptist and the Congregational churches regarded the acceptance of any such payments as a compromise of their principles. But before many of these stalwarts were aware of it, a breach in their wall of defense had been made soon after the war began. A joint board representing the Baptist, Congregationalist, and Primitive and United Methodist churches was appointed to supply the Army with a certain proportion of its chaplains. The desire to share in the ministry offered to the men from the membership of all the Free Churches who had so freely offered themselves for the service of king and country in the hour of peril swept away the objection; and if it is again urged it is not likely that it will find so general support. If the principle is once conceded, however, further applications of it cannot be refused. Why should Christian churches continue their refusal to share in the ministry to the aged

and sick, the diseased in mind, and the prisoners? About unpaid service of this kind there is no question; but there are practical difficulties, sometimes imposed by the public authorities concerned, which are leading many Free Churchmen to the conviction that it can be done efficiently only by a paid agency. Whether they are right or wrong in this assumption it is not our concern now to inquire: suffice it to cite this extension of the principle.

2. The same principle, the acceptance by nonconformists of any payments from the state, is in dispute with regard to education: there are a number of secondary boarding-schools, mainly supported by, although not altogether limited to, nonconformists; hitherto the general policy has been to refuse all state grants. The raising of the standard of education and the greater cost of it combine in so increasing the strain on the voluntary support which can be secured that the breaking-point is being reached; and the question has to be faced whether acceptance of grants involves an abandonment of nonconformist principles. There are other considerations that complicate the issue, but these meanwhile must be left out of account. That the Christian churches should not stand out of the national system of education, of which so great an improvement is in contemplation, but should try to discover how fully they can take their share in its progress, is a very weighty reason for fully facing the whole question. A legitimate tradition of the past may become an illegitimate prejudice in the present; and an appeal to what nonconformist fathers would have said or done is trifling with the responsibility of their sons to think and act for themselves as seems best in the actual situation.

3. As long as there is an Established Church, and as long as in connection with education denominational advantages, involving often the sacrifice of educational efficiency, are being snatched, the question will remain difficult to answer. Were no church privileged or controlled by the state, then the solution of the problem of the relation of church and state in mutual service in the interests of the community could be more hopefully attempted. Meanwhile, however, the Free Churches are confronted with practical difficulties, which a "rule of thumb" application of abstract principles will not relieve. That the need for reconsider-

ation of all these questions is being recognized in the Free Churches I claim as a sign that they do not want to be hindered by the traditions of the past in the service that they are called to render to the present.

#### IV

That the Council of the Free Churches of England calls itself *National* is an indication of an advance from the only too common position when each denomination, and even in many cases each congregation, lived for itself and worked by itself.

1. That the National Free Church Council has rendered and is still rendering invaluable service to the nation through the Free Churches should be fully acknowledged. In public affairs it is generally recognized as focusing the general opinion of the Free Churches. It is often made a complaint that nonconformity has not the political influence which it once had; and the explanation is offered that there has been a deterioration in the quality of the men that the churches are producing. I do not believe this to be the true reason. Till Liberalism was divided on the question of home rule nonconformity presented a compact mass of Liberal opinion. When many, especially of the wealthier nonconformists, became Unionists, they not only abandoned their Liberalism upon that one point, but accepted on many other public questions a position contrary to the staunch tradition of civic as well as religious liberty which prevailed in nonconformity. This division of opinion in the Free Churches silenced its testimony and decreased its influence in public affairs. It is certain that the National Free Church Council has not felt free to act as courageously and effectively as otherwise it might have done, because it knew that on not a few of the questions nonconformity was speaking with a divided voice. One thing it has accomplished: it has brought together in personal friendship and cordial co-operation many of the leaders of the Free Churches, and so has prepared the way for the closer federation of the Free Churches now under consideration.

2. The National Council was representative of local councils, adhesion to which in any place was altogether voluntary, and thus it could not claim directly to represent the denominations. It could



only advise common action; it could not use any authority to make its advice effective. The result has been that while many of the most influential men in the denominations have worked most devotedly for the Free Church Council, yet the denominations in carrying out their policy have paid no regard to the aims or efforts of the Council. The men of wider sympathies have found it easy and pleasant to work together. The keen denominationalists, who often carry very much more weight in the inner councils of the church they belong to than do men who are much better known to the religious world outside, have been able to delay and thwart the united action of the Free Churches. What Mr. Shakespeare, the secretary of the Baptist Union of England, proposed when he was chairman of the National Council, was the formation of the *Free Church of England*, in which each of the denominations would preserve its autonomy in matters concerning itself, but which would be capable of corporate action in many ways now not open to the Free Church Council. The negotiations are still going on. What will be secured probably is an organization which might be best described by the title the *Federated Free Churches of England*. It has been most gratifying to find to how large an extent agreement has been found practicable. The waste and scandal of overlapping in some places, where there are more Free Churches, all weak and struggling, than there is any need for, may be ended. Opportunities for extension in newly populated districts will be embraced, not sporadically by this or that denomination, but by a united effort. It will be possible for the Free Churches so to pool their resources that unitedly they will be able to provide for the religious needs of the country as they have never been able to do before. The motive of the movement is not hostility to the Church of England, but solicitude for the religious condition of England, the aspiration to make it, not in conflict, but in co-operation, with the church, a truly Christian country. It is already seen from the results of the conferences that have been held that such a union involves no sacrifice of principles that should be held fast, but only the discovery of how much more real is the unity of faith and life in Christ than are the differences in doctrine or practice. A change of conviction regarding the things that matter in the Chris-

tian church has made smooth a path that would have been very rough to tread had the old denominational rigidity and exclusiveness still prevailed. Let not this movement be suspected as the device of wily ecclesiastics, but be welcomed as the purpose of genuinely Christian men to make as visible to the world as they can the unity which they are discovering in Christ as common Savior and supreme Lord. A great stride forward will have been made by the Free Churches when they secure this federation.

## V

This movement toward the Federated Free Churches of England is not the only approach toward Christian unity.

1. The relation of the Church of England and the Free Churches is becoming very much more cordial. The war has brought the citizens of this country very much nearer to one another; the common danger and the common duty have made the churches more conscious of their unity in Christ than of their differences from one another. While there is the conviction generally held in the Christian churches that the nation was right in entering the war in defense of Belgian neutrality and in resistance to German tyranny, yet the fact that Christendom is at war on such a scale and with such methods is compelling Christian men to ask themselves whether the churches of Christ have been as faithful to their trust as they might have been, especially whether their testimony and influence have not been weakened by their unhappy divisions. Reports of Army chaplains and other Christian workers have brought home to the churches a fact that they had not as fully realized as they might have done had their discernment been keener and their solicitude for the souls of men deeper, namely, that the great majority of the nation is indifferent to the Christian church, though not hostile to Christ. The Church of England Mission of Repentance and Hope has rather confirmed than dispelled this humbling discovery. Desiring to do better the work of Christ all the Christian churches are being drawn closer together. There is no room for competition; there is no excuse for conflict; the duty of the hour is co-operation.

2. Another reason for this drawing together is to be found, I believe, in the Student Christian movement, which has brought Churchmen and Free Churchmen into intimate relations with one another, the result of which is mutual understanding and respect. Those who have been chums at college are not likely in after-life to distrust one another. The common interest in theological inquiry, social reform, and missionary enterprise which the movement is developing is a strong, and there is good ground for believing an enduring, bond of unity. When the direction of the affairs of the churches falls into the hands of these younger men we may believe that the unity will find adequate expression.

3. To the United States is due another impulse toward unity. While the war has delayed the proposed Conference on Faith and Order, the preparation for it in Great Britain has been going on without clamor or display. Anglicans and nonconformists have been conferring together and have been discovering how near they are to one another as they come near to Christ. A declaration has been made public regarding the agreement reached on matters of faith. While some "liberals" in both camps have objected to the positive tone of the statements about doctrine, to most Christians it has been a joy to find how close is the accord with regard to the central verities of the Christian gospel. As might be expected, on questions of order it has been found much more difficult to discover and to define agreement. As the second declaration in which these matters will be discussed has not yet been made public, I am not at liberty to indicate its contents. I am justified in saying, however, that the Spirit of God has guided those who have conferred together to a measure of agreement that would have seemed humanly impossible. Those who have thus conferred together are quite aware that they have realized their unity in Christ as the churches they represent have not yet done in equal degree; but their own experience is to them a promise and a pledge that when the Christian churches will come together under the guidance of the Spirit to seek those things that make for peace they will also discover how much more precious are their agreements than formidable their differences. What has so far been done is no attempt to anticipate what may be done at the

conference when it is held. No articles of union have been drawn up; for the statements of agreement only those who have added their signatures are responsible. But it is hoped that the conference is being prepared for in putting before the churches the questions for discussion in such a way as not to provoke controversy, but to evoke concord of spirit, if not always agreement of opinion. It has been one of the deepest satisfactions I have ever had to have shared in these endeavors.

## VI

In a previous article<sup>1</sup> I felt it my unwelcome duty to call attention to the dangers of reaction, theological and ethical, that the war has brought. It is a welcome pleasure now to express the conviction that on the whole the position in these respects is one of promise. The doctrine of the atonement, the center of evangelical theology, is receiving a respectful attention such as was not given to it before. Men are asking themselves the ultimate questions to which the Christian gospel alone gives adequate answers. Not a few Christian ministers are bewildered about the answers that they should give, as they feel that a traditional orthodoxy does not meet the need. But they are seeking for guidance; and steps are being taken by lectures to, and conferences with, ministers to help them out of their difficulties. The pulpit should be more closely in touch with reality after the war than it was before. While there is no distinct evidence of religious revival, and even the anxieties, difficulties, and miseries of war have led in some cases to a loss of interest in the worship and work of the churches, yet the churches are alive to their opportunity and obligation as they have not been for many years. More strenuous efforts than have ever been made before are being planned to lay hold on the manhood of the nation when it returns from the fields of battle. It is hoped that for a time at least, until the old routine recovers its captives, there will be greater responsiveness to religious and moral appeal of the right kind. The churches are also hearing the call to social service, to participation in the reconstruction that must begin as soon as peace is secured. One anxiety presses sorely on many serious and

<sup>1</sup> *American Journal of Theology*, XXI (July, 1917), 325-38.

earnest men, although the churches as a whole have not yet been made to feel it; and it is this, lest the terms of peace should be such that the Christian conscience could not unreservedly approve them. One aspiration possesses these men, that the peace shall by its nature start mankind on a new stage of progress toward the reconciliation of all peoples. Many in England are looking to President Wilson to give decisive assistance to all who here or in other lands are resolved to have a peace that will make an end of war in the world, and so will allow all the resources of culture and civilization, under the inspiration of Christianity, to be employed, not in mutual destruction, but for the upbuilding of the City of God in earth. In the discharge of that task the largest opportunity and so the heaviest obligation rests on the English-speaking peoples. Into this sacred partnership the Free Churches of England, with gratitude to God, welcome their Christian brethren in America.